

**Unlocking Equity:  
Navigating Resource Allocation Challenges  
in K-12 U.S. Public Schools**

**By Logan Mestler  
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## **Abstract**

Equitable resource allocation within K-12 public schools across the United States is critical. It can ensure that socioeconomic circumstances do not hinder students' abilities to attain their fullest potential. This paper provides introductory information to contextualize this topic and then explores a variety of related obstacles to equity. These barriers include challenges in the domains of teacher and administrator quality, rural education, and access to college preparation programming. A number of possible recommendations are then proposed in the form of revitalized finance models, universal education savings accounts, charter schools, educator-related resources, and sports equipment donations. Overall, this paper's comprehensive analysis can help promote equity and enhance students' lives.

## **Introduction**

The concept of equity in nationwide K-12 public education is vital to distributing resources among students according to the principles of fairness and inclusion. Indeed, "Equity matters because it improves schools and assists students in achieving academic success" (Thompson and Thompson). Unfortunately, the reality of the K-12 public education system throughout the United States presents a stark contrast to this ideal. Morgan and Amerikaner have discovered significant disparities in educational opportunities among nearly 51 million children attending public schools, noting that "...the educational opportunities provided...are anything but equal." Instead of public education serving as a great equalizer that can level the playing field for students from diverse backgrounds, these students are often disenfranchised by a disturbingly lopsided distribution of resources.

Inequality in education is further exacerbated by increased segregation within and among schools. "Schools are more segregated today than at any time within the last 40 years...effectively creating further economic and racial segregation in our education system" (Ostrander). The concentration of Latino and African-American students in school districts with lower property values reinforces socioeconomic disparities. Indeed, the United States exhibits some of the most significant income-based educational achievement gaps among industrialized nations. Plucker and Peters have demonstrated that these gaps reflect a systemic issue in which economic disparities translate into educational inequities – and vice-versa. Knight highlights that approximately one in five school districts across the country may face substantial resource inequities and thereby contribute to this phenomenon.

Before proceeding, it is important to understand the structure of school funding in the United States. This process is characterized by complex state-level formulas and local property taxes. In fact, "Every state provides additional funds to school districts based on a formula, with the details varying widely across states..." (Chingos and Blagg). These formulas are designed with multiple objectives, including the intention to provide targeted support for school districts facing higher operational costs or serving students with special needs. Despite these intentions, the result of such formulas is often

severe inequality. Farrie and Sciarra have observed that states such as New Hampshire and Nevada tend to allocate inadequate amounts of funding to high-poverty school districts.

Moreover, Morgan and Amerikaner have discovered extreme differences in funding between school districts serving the wealthiest and poorest students – noting a gap of approximately \$1,000 per student. This gap widens further when considering racial disparities. Districts serving students of color tend to receive significantly less funding than average. Such financial disparities are closely tied to educational quality and teacher qualifications. Adamson and Darling-Hammond link low district salaries with poorer working conditions, higher teacher turnover, and a greater presence of inexperienced teachers in districts that serve minority and low-income students.

In addition to the aforementioned state formulas, a reliance on local property taxes as a primary source of school funding may contribute to such disparities. Baker describes this system as creating “savage inequalities” in which the wealth of a neighborhood directly influences the quality of its public schools. Ostrander and Mitias further discuss the socioeconomic dynamics at play, noting how lower-funded schools often serve more homogenous, disadvantaged communities, while wealthier families opt for better-funded schools or private education. Furthermore, Mota et al. have noted how this process can result in multiple islands of well-funded and poorly-funded districts. This approach risks neglecting students who could benefit most from additional support and reinforces educational inequities (Smith et al.).

## **Obstacles To Equity**

### *Teacher and Administrator Quality*

Baker et al. emphasize the importance of examining teacher and administrator quality with respect to student outcomes. Principals can play a crucial role in creating effective learning environments, especially in high-poverty schools where challenges may be more prominent. Yet Oakes et al. state that while 82% of principals at low-poverty schools plan to remain in their positions for at least three more years, only 53% of their counterparts at high-poverty schools share such intentions. Since principals in high-poverty schools often lack access to resources that could enable them to effectively perform their job functions, their ability to foster a stable teaching force and student body may be jeopardized.

Furthermore, attracting and retaining high-quality teachers can be complicated by systemic practices such as staff-based budgeting (Darden and Cavendish). This budgeting method often does not account for the distinct resource needs of poorer school districts. Many teachers in these low-income districts have thereby resorted to paying for classroom supplies out of their own pockets. Grey reports that a staggering 94% of public school teachers purchase supplies with their own funds – with an average out-of-pocket expenditure of \$860 during the 2022-23 school year. As a result of such conditions, efforts to recruit qualified teachers in disadvantaged schools can be extremely difficult.

## *Rural Education*

There is also a connection between educational inequality and rural school districts across the United States. Dhaliwal and Bruno reference the United States Census Bureau's definition of rural areas in terms of significant distances from urban centers. One of the main challenges facing rural school districts is the high cost of transportation due to the varying geographic locations of students. In turn, rural districts often face higher transportation expenses, including the cost of shuttling students to supplemental services and afterschool activities which may be located at different school sites (Dhaliwal and Bruno). This situation underscores the logistical and financial burdens that many rural school districts face. Furthermore, rural districts may encounter unique financial pressures concerning infrastructure. According to Dhaliwal and Bruno, expenditures on school building construction and maintenance are typically higher in rural areas. This is partly due to fixed costs and requirements for additional classroom space per student.

There is another financial consideration that rural school districts possess which may drive educational resource disparities. This factor includes a generally disproportionate amount of spending that rural districts allocate to students' academic instruction. This is because a significant amount of such resources need to instead be spent on student extracurricular activities due to a lack of economies of scale and geographic constraints (Dhaliwal and Bruno). In contrast, non-rural and suburban school districts tend to experience a greater amount of funding toward academic benchmarks of success such as teacher salaries and benefits. This disparity suggests that non-rural districts may allocate more resources towards direct academic instructional support and staff compensation.

## *Access to College Preparation Programming*

The college application process presents a number of obstacles for students who attend low-income school districts. The funding inequities that these students face can ultimately impact their ability to make informed decisions regarding higher education choices. Page and Scott-Clayton identify two primary issues related to this challenge: a lack of access to expert college application preparation best practices and the overwhelming nature of navigating postsecondary options. These daunting barriers can lead to students making crucial educational decisions based on factors that should not be central to such decision-making processes (such as the appeal of surface-level amenities or the desire to avoid complex applications). This issue is particularly relevant for high-achieving, low-income students. Due to geographic isolation from similarly achieving peers in high-income districts, these students may find their college application choices influenced more by the socioeconomic status of their peers rather than academic compatibility (Page and Scott-Clayton).

Without introducing more effective structures into the college application journey for students in high-poverty school districts, it is unlikely that their success rate throughout this process will improve. According to Page and Scott-Clayton, these students often lack targeted guidance and support that could result in more informed decision-making. The absence of such interventions

suggests that educators and policymakers generally do not address the informational and social barriers that hinder these students in this domain. Without such effective guidance, low-income students may continue to be ill-equipped to make choices related to their higher education applications and school selection that accurately reflect their academic abilities.

## **Recommendations**

### *Revitalized Finance Models*

In order to provide helpful recommendations that address the aforementioned concerns, it is critical to understand the nature of school finance reform in the United States. Researchers have demonstrated a strong connection between education spending and future economic outcomes for students. Partelow et al. have revealed a direct correlation between per-pupil expenditures and the subsequent earnings of these individuals as adults. This suggests that strategic investments in education can help narrow the income disparity between students who come from high- and low-income districts. This vantage point is further reinforced by the observation that a 10 percent increase in per-student spending tends to correlate with a 7 percent increase in adult wages for low-income students – alongside a reduction in poverty rates by 3 percent (Partelow et al.). This research underscores the importance of targeted investments in educational resources such as enhancing teacher salaries and extending the school day in low-income districts. These factors can bolster student achievement and, by extension, their future economic prospects.

Securing adequate funding for students in need is linked to leveraging interrelationships between legal obligations, political campaigns, and the distribution of educational resources. Farrie and Sciarra emphasize that state lawmakers bear the legal responsibility to fund public school systems adequately. This foundational duty implies that any significant change in school finance should likely be pursued through political channels. One way that this can occur is by targeting legislators and governors to enact reforms that ensure the equitable distribution of resources across public schools within their jurisdiction.

In addition, Epstein has researched school finance models that can increase the equitable distribution of funding across districts. This approach suggests the use of state-wide funding measures that can limit reliance on local taxes. This phenomenon could promote equity by limiting geographic and economic disparities that are fueled by local tax revenue. Echoing this sentiment, Baker and Welner advocate for the autonomy of individual states in determining funding levels and accountability across local public school districts. They argue that the pursuit of equity in this context can be achieved through the intervention of state governments. In this framework, state governments wield considerable power over the financial and policy measures that shape educational opportunities for students (Baker and Welner).

Furthermore, Morgan and Amerikaner highlight the importance of state allocation of funds

based on district need. This approach emphasizes the critical role of accounting for students' socioeconomic characteristics in these decisions. In turn, targeted funding can significantly impact the educational opportunities available to students in need. Expanding upon this notion, the concept of vertical equity may constitute a related solution. Vertical equity entails a funding model that acknowledges the varying needs of students by allocating resources commensurately. This model is based on the understanding that students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds require additional support to achieve educational parity (Lueken and Shuls). By endorsing a system that adjusts funding levels based on the specific needs of students, vertical equity can result in a more just distribution of educational resources.

Lakis introduces an additional approach to achieving equity through funding mechanisms. She advocates for a shift away from property tax revenue to sales tax revenue to fund educational resources. In tandem with Lakis' approach, it is important to personalize such funding in ways that address underlying socioeconomic disparities in accordance with the principles of distributive justice (Hoxby). This change can result in a more equitable system by ensuring that funds are allocated based on students' needs rather than geography.

The role of federal funding in promoting equity is also important. Gartner emphasizes that there is an untapped potential regarding the immense contribution that federal dollars can contribute to more equitable schooling. This is partly because federal funding may be less prone to local geographic and political constraints that often prevent resources from being allocated to the students who most need them. Additionally, Dhaliwal and Bruno suggest that federal funding formulas should be adjusted for rural districts to account for the aforementioned complexities involved in accurately addressing the needs of these communities.

Plucker and Peters propose an alternative approach to addressing funding inequities in K-12 education. They advocate for allowing schools to receive special monetary credits for efforts aimed at developing the talents of underrepresented students. This proposal emphasizes rewarding strides to achieve greater equity, particularly in the context of advanced learners from low-income or minority backgrounds. Lastly, Li et al. advocate for integrating funding performance metrics beyond traditional measures such as retention rates and degree completions. To this end, they propose monitoring student performance in developmental education and gateway courses over time in comparison with the amount of funding such programs receive. This recommendation endeavors to ensure that funding policies can be shaped by accountability.

### *Universal Education Savings Accounts*

Universal education savings accounts (ESAs) are another potentially viable solution to addressing inequitable resource allocation in K-12 education. ESAs represent a departure from the public education financing procedures that were described in the previous section. ESAs entail offering parents a means to leverage public funds for a broad array of educational services beyond public school

districts or charter schools (Lueken and Shuls). This approach enables parents to allocate resources for private school tuition, online programs, tutoring, and even post-secondary education expenses. ESAs thereby allow parents to personalize the education of their children.

The underlying principle of ESAs is that equity in education can be achieved through a universal system of choice. From this perspective, educational funding is linked to the unique needs of each student rather than being determined by geography or the type of educational institution. This model can help ensure that students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have access to the same level of funding as students who reside in wealthier zip codes. By allowing families to choose the most suitable educational pathways for their children, ESAs can enable resources to be directed towards services that truly meet the particular educational needs and aspirations of each student (Lueken and Shuls). Transitioning to a national system of universal ESAs would require re-evaluating current funding policies. Although this could be a daunting task, it may be possible. Indeed, Lueken and Shuls are encouraged by the successful proliferation of private school choice programs across states that are similar to ESAs.

### *Charter Schools*

Proponents of charter schools argue that these institutions can provide a necessary alternative to traditional public schools. This is particularly true for students in low-income minority communities. By offering more autonomy and flexibility, charter schools are seen as experimental grounds for innovative educational practices that may lead to improved educational outcomes. One example of this phenomenon is evident through the positive momentum of Success Academy in New York City. Success Academy charter schools have remarkable standardized test performance averages compared to many of their public school counterparts, especially among economically disadvantaged black or Hispanic students (Sowell, *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*).

Burke and Sailor further support the notion that access to charter schools can have transformative impacts on students' lives. Citing data from the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, they highlight the significant number of students – predominantly black or Hispanic – who tend to benefit from the alternative educational pathways that charter schools offer. “Rigorous evaluations...show improved student attainment (high school graduation and college enrollment), improved student safety, and positive effects on character development, such as increased political tolerance, charitable giving, crime reduction, and paternity-suit reduction” (Burke and Sailor). This suggests that the benefits of charter schools may extend beyond mere academic performance.

In order for charter schools to be effective, they must be protected against potentially damaging legislation. “Drastic anti-charter-school laws passed in California in 2019 are part of a nationwide campaign against charter schools. If facts continue to be suppressed, or drowned out by rhetoric, the biggest losers will be children in low-income minority communities” (Sowell, “Charter Schools Are The Best Way To Wipe Out Educational Disparity”). Sowell’s broader commentary on the



decline in American educational performance since the 1960s further contextualizes the argument in support of charter schools. By describing falling scores on standardized tests such as the SAT and ACT that can be attributed to substandard public school education, Sowell underscores a pervasive deterioration in educational outcomes that charter schools aim to address (Sowell, *Inside American Education*).

It is important to note that research by Arsen and Ni introduces a counterpoint to the argument for the efficacy of charter schools in driving systemic educational equity. Their findings suggest that the presence of charter schools does not necessarily compel traditional public schools to reallocate resources towards more achievement-oriented activities in states such as Michigan. This challenges the notion that competition from charter schools inherently leads to widespread improvements in public education systems. From this vantage point, the impact of charter schools on educational equity may be limited.

#### *Educator-Related Resources*

Instructional coaches for educators in high-poverty school districts can also promote educational equity. Partelow et al. highlight the significant impact that hiring effective instructional coaches can have on student achievement. They argue that high-quality coaching programs may not only elevate students' test scores but also play a crucial role in fostering students' social and emotional development. This holistic approach to coaching is most effective when it occurs in a frequent and consistent framework. This framework typically includes observations of teachers in action, designated periods for personalized feedback, and training educators to become master coaches and thereby exert a more widespread impact.

In addition to promoting instructional coaching, Lane et al. examine the importance of teacher incentives to foster equity. Their perspective suggests that directing state investments toward increasing teacher salaries and bonuses can help in this regard. Moreover, providing incentives for districts to enhance school buildings can mitigate disparities in facility quality and create a more hospitable environment that may attract higher quality teachers.

#### *Sports Equipment Donations*

The accessibility of sports equipment is another factor that contributes to inequality among K-12 students. This is particularly true in sports such as football where the cost of proper equipment can be prohibitively high (Nubani et al.). This issue not only hampers the development of potential talent but also impacts the capacity of youth sports programs to effectively contribute to their communities. It is therefore important to donate extra equipment to youth programs to make sports initiatives more accessible for underserved students.

Providing essential gear such as thigh pads, knee pads, cleats, chin straps, gloves, and other

accessories may address the sports equipment accessibility issue on a national scale. These resources can be allocated by leveraging charity events, forming partnerships with educational institutions, and engaging the media to raise awareness. When properly implemented, these efforts can have beneficial results beyond the domains of sports and physical education. Indeed, studies have shown that providing such equipment – and their accompanying extracurricular opportunities – may ultimately enhance academic performance (Guo and Meyerhoefer).

## **Conclusion**

Ensuring that underserved students in K-12 public schools receive equitable funding can result in positive outcomes throughout their lives. These benefits may include enhanced employment opportunities and income levels, improved places of residence, decreased criminal behavior, and a reduction in health conditions (Owens). In order to gain these outcomes, it can be helpful to implement improved education funding models, universal education savings accounts, access to charter schools, educator-related resources, and sports equipment donations. When combined, these recommendations may address obstacles to equity and empower students to attain a high-quality education that improves their lives in holistic ways.

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